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THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

NOVEMBER, 1907

SOCIAL WORK IN THE HAMLINE SCHOOL

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Recent years have made us familiar with various forms of school extension designed to enlarge the function of the public school and make it serve the needs of an entire community. The rapid development of our great industries, the massing of population in large cities, and our practically unrestricted immigration are among the forces producing such radical changes in our social life that the public school must face new problems unknown to the village and to the educational theories of an earlier day. We are learning that the study of school problems should not be separated from the study of the social and industrial conditions of any given period, for ultimately the public school must respond to the needs of the community as created by such conditions. The wonderful changes in the course of study, the introduction into our public-school system of manual training and household arts, nature-study, school gardens, gymnasiums, and playgrounds, in brief, all the studies and the equipment but recently known as "the fads of our new education," have been a response to the cry that the school must be related to the whole of life, that it cannot afford to be isolated or stationary, unmindful of social and industrial progress.

We have enlarged our conception of what the school must do for the child, and we have not been able to do this without finding ourselves in the midst of perplexing questions arising from the relation of the school to the rest of the community.

The idea that the school should be at the service of the adult members of a neighborhood who for various reasons find themselves ill equipped for life and its work has its recognition in the evening school, and in the courses of free popular lectures now common in the larger cities. The next step in school extension is the social center. In an article on this subject in *The Elementary School Teacher*,¹ Dr. Dewey shows why we have reached this point in the development of our educational system, and are destined to go forward with the demand that "the school shall be related more widely, shall receive from more quarters, and shall give in more directions." But it is the practical side of this question that calls for present consideration.

I do not feel [he writes] that the philosophical aspect of the matter is the urgent or important one. The pressing thing, the significant thing, is really to make the school a social center. That is a matter of practice, not of theory. Just what to do in order to make the schoolhouse a center of full and adequate social service, to bring it completely into the current of social life—such are the matters, I am sure, which really deserve the attention of the public.

It was this feeling of the present need of action that led the Educational Department of the Chicago Woman's Club to engage a social worker to give her entire time to the Hamline Public School and its immediate neighborhood. This school is on Forty-eighth and Bishop streets, in that part of Chicago popularly known as the Stockyards District. Germans, Bohemians, and Poles are well represented, relieved and enlivened by a few Irish families, and a limited number who insist upon being called "Americans" by the right of being one generation removed from "the old country." As the simplest beginning, Thursday afternoon was announced as the time when mothers would be welcome at the school to visit their children and gain some knowledge of the daily work, or to consult with the principal and teachers. Invitations, printed on the school press by the boys of the eighth grade, were sent through the children into the homes, with the hope of reaching enough mothers to form a permanent organization that should aid in discovering the best methods of making

¹Vol. III, No. 2, p. 73.

the school a social center. The first efforts were an unlooked-for disappointment. Not only the first, but the second, third, and repeated invitations failed to bring a response from more than a dozen women. Then an interesting discovery was made. The printed slips had been left in desks and books or torn in bits and scattered on the street. Few had found their way into the homes. Children were suspicious and discussed this innovation among themselves. Why should their mothers come to the school-house? Possibly it boded ill for them. At least, it was in their hands to prevent it, and they did. Of course explanations followed, but distrust was not confined to the children alone. Parents too often looked upon the call to attend a purely social gathering as an indication of wrong-doing on the part of their children. One Polish woman voiced a prevailing sentiment when she gave as proof of the good behavior of her children the fact that she herself in ten years had not once set foot inside the school building nor seen one of their teachers.

Possibly nothing could better illustrate one of the needs of a foreign neighborhood than just such results of a simple effort to bring the home and the school into a closer relation. It is unfortunate that in the past parents have considered their duties ended when they sent a child to school and kept him there, by force if necessary. The parent has been strangely silent, surrendering his child to the school system with a curious, unquestioning faith. It is difficult to understand this attitude, except in the light of the old idea of education as a purely intellectual process which must be intrusted to specialists and therefore beyond the comprehension of the average parent. The newer ideal, which seeks to relate the school life of the child to all that concerns him outside of it, is responsible for the parent-teacher associations that have been coming to life in all parts of the country. We have had women's clubs, child-study clubs, mothers' clubs, and congresses of mothers, but nothing comparable to the recent organizations of parents and teachers, meeting in the school building in which their common interests center. Such associations will present varying degrees of efficiency. Obviously the school located in a foreign neighborhood, facing differences in

race, language, and customs, will find the process of unification so slow and difficult that little can be accomplished in the earlier years beyond simple social meetings. Each school district must face its own needs, and from the people themselves must come the growing consciousness of the larger function of the school.

Through the first unsuccessful beginnings with a small group of women this consciousness of larger opportunities both for themselves and for their children is coming to the neighborhood of the Hamline School. It was from them that the suggestion came to open the building one evening in each month. Among hard-working people where all the household duties and the care of a large family fall to one pair of unassisted hands, the number who can find the leisure to attend an afternoon club will always be limited. The opening of the building for evening lectures, entertainments, and social gatherings met a wider need. Two entertainments each year have been furnished by the children. School plays given by the children's dramatic club and choruses of national songs have proved most popular. Travel-talks upon different countries and cities, Washington, San Francisco, Scotland, Ireland, and Japan, illustrated by stereopticon pictures, have been offered by friends interested in the success of the work, and volunteers have not been wanting to help in making the social evenings a success. Men, women, and children of all ages have made up the number of those who are growing accustomed to the open school on one Friday evening in each month and who frankly express their pleasure in the new order.

Among the children the need of furnishing opportunities for the right kind of companionship and social life demanded attention. Here the field is still so large that it is appalling. The average home is not large enough to admit of children's parties, or even the spontaneous play of neighbors. The street in front, or the few feet of ground called the back yard and shared by the ten or fifteen children of a small tenement—these are the spaces in which children play and form the habits of a lifetime. Within easy reach of all, the five-cent theater and penny arcade create an abnormal desire for excitement, and through the vivid use of picture and song too often suggest the glamor of the life

that throws aside the fundamental standards of morality. Here children unconsciously construct their standards of right and wrong and build their air-castles. The development of a high sort of social intercourse is essential to the creation of ethical ideals, and for this reason children's clubs hold an important place. There is enthusiasm in numbers, and it is natural to accept the ideals of an organization. Volunteer leaders were found to direct small clubs. Cooking, sewing, music, stories, books, pictures, and school dramas have been the basis of interest with different groups. The possibilities in this direction are limited by the difficulty in securing efficient leaders who can give the time such clubs demand if their success is assured.

With the coming of spring the desire for outdoor life and contact with growing things led to new plans. On May 1, 1906, a generous neighbor gave the use of two lots on Bishop Street for school gardens. The children of the upper grades cleaned the lots, made bonfires of its rubbish, spaded the ground, and laid it out in small plots ready for planting, incidentally adding to their knowledge of practical arithmetic through the need of finding the number of square feet in the entire space, and the size of the plot that could be allotted to each one of sixty-five children. Poor soil and a constant atmosphere of soot and smoke are not favorable to vegetation, and only the hardiest plants can be induced to thrive in that part of the city; but in spite of discouragements the little garden was counted a success, chiefly through the interest it aroused in the neighborhood and the stimulus it gave to the children to try to make the small spaces in their own yards more attractive. In a community where unassisted nature has apparently given up in despair and left the ground to the mercy of multiplying industries, the importance of even such small efforts can hardly be overestimated. Unfortunately the ground could not be secured the second year and the gardens were discontinued.

The school excursion furnished another means of increasing the interest in outdoor life. The value of the excursion is now recognized even in the city districts favorably located and in part free from the discomforts of a crowded population, but for

the poorer quarters of the city it is not too much to say that trips to the country and to the city parks are a real necessity. Each year has brought its pathetic revelation in the number of children who have never seen a live robin, who scream in ecstasy at finding a frog, who marvel at the flock of sheep in Washington Park, to whom the first sight of Lake Michigan brings a moment of surprised awe. During the first year, excursions were confined to the first-grade children, owing to the lack of funds for street-car fare, but the second year brought contributions large enough to include the entire school. Each room, accompanied by the teacher and a volunteer assistant, was given one excursion either to Jackson or Washington Park. Many of the rooms visited the Field Museum to see whether they could find among the stuffed birds any that looked like the colored pictures exhibited at the school each spring. Then they went to the Wooded Island to discover real birds. One boy of twelve years found and named correctly ten different varieties he had never seen before, identifying them solely from his observation of the pictures and the stuffed birds. Although other children often did much less, not one failed to make some discovery he could call his own, and the eager joy of this one child seemed full compensation for the cost and effort incident to the excursion.

In addition to these outdoor excursions, five upper-class rooms were given a winter trip to the Art Institute. Mrs. Schuhmann met each teacher with her pupils at the Field Memorial Room and gave them simple explanations of a selected group of pictures. Each trip furnished material for classroom work or compositions, and the results showed how much the children need and appreciate these glimpses of a larger world to which they have had no access.

The constant daily contact with these groups of children led to some observation of their physical and mental development, with the result that all who were noticeably below the grade in which they belonged were made the subject of a special study that is not yet completed.

The failure of any child to rank with the majority of his own age may be due to many causes, and it is unfortunate to

reach conclusions on insufficient data, but this failure is at least an evidence that conditions exist which will bear investigation. Each child came under the examination conducted by the school medical inspector during the months of the general scarlet fever and diphtheria epidemic. The results showed marked physical defects in 200 out of the 208 examined. The suspicion that malnutrition and underfeeding might be the most common underlying causes led to an effort to learn something of the home surroundings of each child. A majority of the children slept in ill-ventilated rooms with windows invariably closed at night except in the hottest summer weather. The hours of sleep were irregular and insufficient for growing children. Out of the 208 only two were found who were not addicted to the use of strong tea and coffee two or three times daily. One of the most serious results of this habit is that the tea and coffee seem to take the place of sufficient food. Bread and coffee suffice for breakfast; bread and tea for supper. Practically there is but one adequate meal in the day. As one little girl innocently expressed it, when asked which one of these stimulants served as the drink for the third meal, "Oh, we always *eat* once a day." This condition arises partly from false notions of economy, largely from the easily formed habit of requiring a stimulant, and too often because the overworked mother finds it the quickest way to satisfy the demands of a large family. Many other factors not yet fully ascertained are a part of this slow process of physical deterioration, but these failures to observe the laws of simple hygienic living are given prominence because they may be made the basis of active educational work.

The interest in the physical welfare of school children is not new, but it is a growing interest, and discoveries similar to the above are unfortunately too common. The recent discussions on the subject of school medical inspection, the proposal to furnish lunches and even eyeglasses free of charge, show the recognition of a need that has not been met. Although so many causes combine in an industrial and crowded neighborhood to produce physical deterioration that no single remedy can be safely proposed, the solution of this problem will never be reached through

charitable measures. A part, at least, of the underfeeding is due to ignorance rather than to poverty, and the school must be made the center of a persistent enlightenment not only on this but on all subjects pertaining to the physical life of the child. The disclosures incident to this partial study of 208 children furnished abundant material for discussion in the Mothers' Club and in many homes where a school visitor is always welcome, though both parents may refuse any active part in a club. To expect any sudden change in the habits of a lifetime as the outgrowth of such discussions is impractical, but it is indeed rare to find parents who will not listen to suggestions. However ignorant they may be, they long for the best for their children, and they work and sacrifice with a silent heroism that should bring their reward; but too often both work and sacrifice are in vain because they do not know. They need help and sympathy and understanding, and the school should be the center of a social work that will bring them what they need.

How far this development of different forms of school extension will continue is open to discussion. Nineteen years ago the charter of New York City was amended to give the Board of Education control of school property for "public education, recreation, and *other* public uses"—a free statement which has had a liberalizing effect on the whole system of education, not only there but in all parts of the country. The idea of the school as a social and educational center is growing steadily, but in practice the financial question has checked that growth in every city with the possible exception of New York. Upon whom shall the burden of this extension fall? This same question arose with the demand for kindergartens, evening, and vacation schools, but the gradual incorporation of all three into the public-school system of education is an expression of the conviction that the school must leave its traditional limits. Because the schools have been in the main closed to the growing needs of modern life, social settlements and other agencies for community improvement have been called upon to do a work which properly belongs to the school. For it is the public school in America that is the most purely democratic institution known to the peo-

ple, and it stands in the minds of all as the center of progress regardless of differences in race, creed, custom, politics, or social position. After all, in this, as in every other question, public opinion is the final court of appeal. Schools cannot respond to a need until there is some notion in the community of what the need is. On the other hand it is the work of the schools to create new desires, to help in formulating new wants. Not only must the school accommodate itself to the growth of this form of social democracy; it must aid in that growth.